THE FALLACY

OF A

SUPPOSED VIS MEDICATRIX NATURÆ,

BEING AN INQUIRY INTO THE TRUE NATURE OF DISEASE.

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OF A SUPPOSED VIS MEDICATRIX NATURÆ.

Notwithstanding the antiquity and the universal recognition of a vis medicatrix naturæ, I take the liberty of utterly denying its existence, and assert that *nature never cures disease.*

If "nature cures," then there must be some natural principle at variance with disease. No such principle exists. There is no power of the body, the legitimate function of which is to counteract morbid conditions: if there is, in what does this principle consist? in what circumstances is it made manifest?

The physiological play of the system, in a state of health, is carried on safely, and the vital powers are kept up by a regular and harmonious action of all the organs of the body. We have no difficulty in understanding what are the healthy *forces* of the body. When, however, we come to enquire what are the *health restoring* powers, it is quite another matter, and one by no means so tangible.

It cannot be claimed that the harmony of the organic functions or sympathetic relation between them, is a *health restoring power*, because we find that the moment disease is developed in one organ the harmony of the whole is destroyed.

Physiology contemplates a machine moving on with order and regularity. Disease on the contrary recognizes a machine interrupted in its harmony, displaying unusual phenomena, and often working out its own destruction. In the first of the instances here spoken of, we have nature in the performance of her legitimate work; and so perfect is the harmonious sympathy of the organs in a state of health, that

we find them always ready to relieve each other, if fatigue or any other temporary cause should interrupt their function. This however cannot be depended upon in the event of disease invading the system, either generally or locally.

It is claimed that metastasis is but an "effort of nature" to throw off disease. Admit that metastases do take place, what evidence does this afford that it is to throw off disease, more than that it is an "effort of nature" to extend disease? The argument is at least as confirmatory of the one view as the other. Is it not nearer the truth to say, that disease has so effectually deranged the organism, that any or all of the organs are liable to take on the diseased action? Metastasis is dependent, not upon an "*effort*" of nature, but upon a sympathetic relation of organs. This sympathy is a physiological principle, and by it this transfer is effected; but by what train of reasoning are we led to conclude that the end or aim is to cure more than to kill? The change that may take place, on a transfer of diseased action, cannot be depended upon as a sanatory change. True, it may possibly occur that the organ, to which the disease is removed, may be less subject to the destructive influence of the inflammation or disease in question—then the change will be sanatory; but if, on the contrary, it should be more subject to its destructive influence, the danger is enhanced. In this last case, if we adopt the hypothesis that it is "an effort" of nature, we must say that it is an effort of nature to *destroy* the patient. It may be as well to mention here, that as there are some nice points of distinction to be kept in view, it is the design of this paper to show that *physiological* action has nothing to do with either the producing or the curing of disease. Among healthy powers, there is one to replenish the waste of the body, and, also to a limited extent, to restore losses occasioned by disease.

Physiology is the study of man in a state of health; Pathology considers man in a state of disease—enquires into the causes that produce changes of structure or derangement of functions. Pathology describes the phenomena attendant upon changes of nutrition as well as changes of secretion.

All terms expressing the action of nature, and still more those imputing effort or design to nature, should be limited to the physiological idea of her operations, as legitimately, (in the limited sense of the word and sphere of operations under consideration,) our "nature" has nothing to do with,

nor any control over, a pathological condition—that being itself an unnatural state.

Some contend indeed that inflammation and fever are but reactions of the system upon disease—"efforts of nature" to throw off morbid matter, and *resist* disease. It is claimed that inflammation and fever are the direct effects of this great medicatrix herself—processes of cure, instituted by nature for her own relief. In answer to this, we say inflammation and fever *are* diseases. The effect of inflammation is to interrupt the function of secretion in the organ affected. Inflammation is itself the result, not of an effort of nature to throw off poison, but of an increasing impression produced by the morbific agent, preventing the natural action of the part—which from irritation becomes inflammation. True, inflammation, if left alone, will often terminate favorably; but this only proves that the force of the disease is exhausted —has spent its power.

If purulent matter be formed as the result of this inflammatory action, it tends naturally to the external surface, and this is thought to depend upon an effort of nature. This is not, however, from any special *effort* or design, but from the simple circumstance that the vital powers of the body are stronger internally than externally. As a consequence, ulceration from destructive inflammation advances towards the surface externally. This view receives additional confirmation from the fact that if any resistance is met with in its exit externally, as faciœ or other structures not easily perforated, then it goes internally.

If fever supervene in the system from some slight but general irritation, there is then a temporary suspension of the secretions. When the fever subsides and the system returns to its natural condition, the secretions are set up again; and the organ first brought into action, is most likely to eliminate the superabundance of matter accumulated during the temporary suspension. The "crisis" that may occur is attributed to *a vis medicatrix*.

It would be thought very strange to advance the idea, that any acrid substance which might be brought into contact with the body, calculated to destroy its structure, was but a healthful auxiliary to the system; and yet it is the same thing in another form that we are desired to believe; for inflammation, unless relieved, will as certainly destroy the substance involved in the derangement, as the actual cautery. In the face of this fact, it is believed that *inflammation*

is a healthful "effort of nature" for her own protection. The circumstance that effusion and suppuration take place when the inflammation has subsided, does not prove that either is an effort of nature to throw off disease. It would rather favor the idea that it was the result of a restoration of the natural powers, more or less completely relieved of disease.

That the idea may be more clearly presented, two considerations are offered: 1st. Nature never cures disease from any inherent power in itself, considered either physically or metaphysically; and, 2d. That all spontaneous cures of disease are simply the result of its cessation—of a *deficient force* in the disease-producing cause.

The first of these propositions is considered of the more importance, because the idea that nature possesses a principle or power capable of combating and curing disease, has given rise to what is so significantly called the "Expectant" plan of treatment, first systematized amongst the French. It is not, however, confined to France, but is making its way into England, if we may rely upon Dr. Jones, of *St. George's Hospital*, as a fair exponent of the professional view of that country. His reporter says, "he declared himself inclined to admit the expectant method of medication, grounding his opinion upon the fact that the *forces of the body* oftener effected the cure than the physician or surgeon."

The opinion expressed by Dr. Jones is also the opinion of a large class of medical philosophers, and he is quoted here as expressing fully and clearly the doctrine held by them. The spread of this doctrine, which is making its way throughout Europe, is owing, we humbly conceive, to a blind idolatry of a false principle, a *vis medicatrix naturæ*. Whatever may be the tendency in transatlantic countries, this doctrine has by no means met with universal favor amongst American physicians.

The expectant method of treatment, then, is based upon the notion that the *forces of the body* are capable of resisting morbid impressions and correcting physical derangements. Hence its value, as a system of practice, must be determined by the correctness of this philosophy. If it is proven that the *forces of the body* have no influence over the *force of disease*, then the "expectant" plan of treatment may be *expected* to prove a failing reliance.

We object to this blind confidence in nature, because there is no principle of action in the animal economy besides the physiological principles. Now the only available principle

of physiology, as we have already observed, is sympathy, and this sympathy cannot be depended on. Its result may be evil as well as good. We find, however, this physiological idea relied on by the advocates of *nature*. Dr. Mackenzie says, (*Med. Ch. Rev. vol.* xxiii. *page* 590,) "nature often cures or prevents one disease by producing another; or as this plan has been termed, *converting one disease into another*." The *certainty* of this "plan" is at once set aside by the same author, for he says, "It would appear that there are two varieties of conversion. The one may be called *sanative*, for it produces health; and the other *insanative*, for though it removes one disease, it does not restore health." The only legitimate inference from all this is, that nature is as likely to do mischief as good. What a compliment to nature. What an exalted reflection upon the Creator of a perfect system of natural adaptations!

Who can contemplate nature in her operations and not behold connection and harmony in all her works, as well as precision in all her results. We also believe in *nature;* but not in a nature of constant uncertainty and change. Whatever may be the idea of her curative powers, never disparage the works of nature by saying that she fails to carry out what she has, or more correctly, *was* designed to perform.

The doctrine that nature cures disease, is predicated upon "false facts." There is no evidence that there are any *forces of the body* calculated to correct morbid derangements. In fact, there are no such forces as are spoken of. It is evident that nature can only act physiologically; and nothing is clearer than that the physiology of an organ is suspended when that organ is in a pathological condition. If physiological action is not curative, what principle then, in the animal economy, is? Surely not a pathological one.

We have thus far considered the natural or physiological conditions and operations of the animal economy. It will be well to turn attention to the opposite considerations of the subject. To do this, it will be necessary to enquire into the nature and character of disease.

By disease is understood an alteration from the healthy structure or function—in other words, a pathological instead of a physiological condition. It will be seen by the definition of disease as given by authors in general, that the peculiar difference claimed in this discussion is admitted.

This distinction, so universally recognized, justifies the conclusion that disease is to be referred to a distinct and

separate principle—which for convenience is called here disease-*force*. As the only known forces of the body are physiological, so that of disease must be referred to a foreign force, that destroys the normal action of the animal economy. The morbific causes that may act upon the body are not to be regarded as disease, until they have perverted or destroyed the healthy action.

That we may more fully comprehend the relation existing between what we chose to call *disease force* and a *physiological force*, we will consider them in their separate and distinct relations. To the latter is referred that concurrent action of all the organs of the body which constitutes health—the harmony of life. By the former, on the contrary, we understand the cause of a partial or general interruption of the functions of the body; or more or less destruction of one or more of the organs.

If we set out with the idea that nature cures disease—that it is only necessary for the physician to "watch" the operations of nature, we may justly be regarded as a class of community of questionable usefulness. A very consistent doubt has entered the minds of those who have this great confidence in the "curative power of nature," as to whether the physician is not of absolute injury by interrupting nature.

This doctrine of a *vis medicatrix naturæ* is all an assumption, and necessarily implies that there is a *principle* in nature at variance with all kinds of morbid action. This principle, we have shown, can only have an existence in the imagination. There are powers in the body to repair the injuries occasioned by disease, notwithstanding the want of power to cure. These powers of the system, however, never act until disease has subsided. The powers here spoken of are *formation* and *reproduction*, which processes commence when diseased action ceases. This property of nature is brought into play in the restoration of losses occasioned by accident or disease. Patients recover, it is true, in either case, and that without medication. This brings us to consider the second proposition, viz: that all spontaneous cures of disease are simply the result of its cessation—of a deficient force in the disease-producing cause.

It does not follow that because a disease "gets well," that therefore nature possesses a *force* to "overcome" it. The extent of the ravages of disease is dependent upon the force or power of the exciting cause—the impression made. If, for instance, a quantity of acid be dropped upon the cuticle,

at once disease is set up, and this will continue until the acid is neutralized. After this action is arrested, then nature comes in to repair the injury—to reproduce the lost parts. There is not in nature any force calculated to counteract the acid, and the same holds good in regard to malaria, contagion, or any other cause of disease. There is no power in the physical constitution able to arrest or correct actual derangements. This arrest or correction must be the result of one of two causes. It may result from want of *force* to extend itself, and thus cease from exhaustion of power; or it may result from medication.

Those who look to the natural powers of the system for the cure of disease, say that the physician removes the hindrances that embarrass nature. This is a mistake. The physician on the contrary destroys the *force* of the disease. This is done sometimes by removing the cause; at other times, by withdrawing the influences that keep up the disease. If we remove the cause of a disease before the development, we have no disease; but if it remain until an impression is produced and inflammation supervene, it will be obviously necessary to reduce the circulation in the part; not, however, with a view to let nature effect a cure of the inflammation, but to cut off the pabulum to its support.

The reproductive powers of nature have often misled on this subject. It should be borne in mind that there is a difference between *repairing* an injury already done, and offering an *opposition* to the cause producing this injury. It is not meant merely that there is no "intelligent power or powers residing in the body superintending or operating in the cure;" but that there is not any power, intelligent or otherwise, that nature has designed as an antagonist to disease.

The effect of this blind adherence to nature is making itself manifest in the gradual progress of the "expectant" plan of treatment, as well as the confidence and favor shown to Homœopathy, and the effort to explain their *cures* upon natural principles. This explanation is unnecessary. The plain and simple fact is, on neither plan is any disease ever cured.

One of the causes of error in this matter, is found in a mistaken view of the *critical* period. The mistake arises from the fact, we have always, by general consent, without enquiring into the matter, attributed the cure to this critical evacuation. The fact is, that this critical discharge

is the result of a cessation of disease. In this case the difficulty is, that the effect is taken for the cause. It would be more satisfactory to say, *disease having exhausted or destroyed itself, nature is left to renew her operations unobstructed.* This restoration of natural action is attended with a reaction. This reaction produces the critical discharge, which is the result and not the cause.

It is said we should watch nature, and be guided by her in our efforts to relieve obstructions.

In considering this point, we should keep in mind that all acceleration of circulation is not disease. Acceleration of circulation may terminate in or even develope an inflammation, but is not one in itself. This distinction is necessary in determining whether nature can be depended upon in this matter, any more than in the cases we have before considered. In the case of dentition, we have an accelerated circulation to supply the increased quantity of blood, to provide, in addition to the nourishment of the parts, the matter requisite to the new productive process. In the event of inflammation supervening, we have an interruption of the process as a consequence of disease. If we regard this inflammation in the same light we did the previous acceleration of circulation, under the circumstances, as a curative and healthful supervention of nature, the dictates of common sense would point to the increase of this inflammation as desirable. On the contrary, if this inflammation be considered a disease, as it is, at variance with the sanatory operations of nature, the obvious treatment is to reduce the inflammatory action, not that nature may "throw off the disease," but that she may be left to pursue the even tenor of her way.

So far has this doctrine been carried, that it was supposed by Stahl that this principle was superior to and independent of the body, and belonged to what he called the *rational soul.* He was not further wrong than those who suppose it a principle of nature belonging to *the body.* May we not expect soon to hear of the discovery of glands for secreting antidotes for the various poisons taken into the stomach?

Metastasis is another "effort of nature" for the *cure* of disease. This error has, like others, been admitted, under the impression that nature would guide us aright in these matters. But laying aside for a moment this great confidence in her professional capacity, let us consider also what are the facts in this case.

When metastasis takes place, it depends altogether upon the nature of the change whether it is curative. If the

change be to an organ less susceptible of injury, the result is favorable—a sanatory change; but if, on the contrary, the metastasis is to an organ more liable to the destructive influence, then there is a morbid nature—the "vis medicatrix" becomes the vis vitiatrix. Where then is the certainty that metastasis is an "effort of nature" for the cure of disease?

These "efforts" of nature are as often detrimental as good. Nature, in this sense of the term, as truly kills as cures. Dr. SYMONDS in answer to Dr. COMBE, says: "We instinctively transfer to external nature our own motives. A man has died of a wound; we find in the main artery, which has been divided, and through which his life has gushed away, an imperfect coagulum. We say that nature had tried to save him, but had failed. We examine a child who died of croup. The windpipe is all but entirely blocked up by the albuminous exudation, but we do not say 'nature very nearly succeeded in choking the poor child.' On the contrary, if we find ever so small a portion of false membrane detached from the mucous lining, we exclaim, 'See, nature had made an effort to save the child.' Or, take the case of a patient dead of typhoid fever. Death had been immediately induced by the hemorrhage from a pyerian ulcer; on examining one of the eliptical patches in the ileum, we find that, at the base of the ulceration there is nothing but the thin layer of serous membrane. But we do not say, 'Nature had very nearly killed the patient by spontaneous perforation.' On the contrary, the least flake of albumen on the peritoneal covering of the gut, would be enough to make us take it as a hint of nature's kind intention of strengthening the parts by an adhesion to an adjoining surface. Such views occur to us, partly because the sanative purpose is ever uppermost in our minds, and partly because, in normal anatomy and physiology, we are familiar with most wonderful and extensive provision for the safety and well being of the living organism."

This explains fully the partiality we have for recognizing, in all spontaneous cures of disease, an effort of nature.

It has been the purpose of this paper to show the true objects of nature, in contrast with the assumed office assigned her by those whose great confidence and reliance is in a *vis medicatrix naturæ*.